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ABSTRACT

According to the latest report by the Institute of International Education, 586,323 foreign students studied in the United States in the 2002-2003 academic year. Foreign students benefit U.S. colleges and universities in many ways, including economic contributions and the value of their work as teachers and researchers, but there has been increased concern about foreign students since the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. The United States began establishing a student tracking system in the mid-1990s, and following the September 11 attacks, Congress authorized more than $36 million to implement and expand the tracking system. The Student and Exchange Visitors System (SEVIS) was completed to allow officials to collect information about foreign students and exchange visitors. Schools enrolling foreign students are required to report certain information about student enrollment and changes to address, name, or field of study. SEVIS has faced a number of challenges, especially because of difficulties in meeting tight deadlines for implementation. The Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement has begun working to reduce the backlog in student visas and ensure that students from schools pending certification can gain entry into the United States. (SLD)

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Tracking Foreign Students in the U.S.: Recent Developments
By Patricia Wood

Our nation's higher education system is one of the strongest attractions we offer to foreign citizens. According to the latest report by the Institute of International Education, 586,323 foreign students studied in the United States during the 2002-2003 academic year (Jacobson, 2003).

Benefits of Foreign Students
In the Chronicle of Higher Education, Victor Johnson, associate executive director for public policy at NAFSA: Association of International Educators, discussed the myriad ways that foreign students benefit American colleges. They add diversity to the student body and provide many Americans the first close contact they have with a person from another culture; they fill the under-enrolled science courses that colleges would otherwise find it difficult to offer; and they provide crucial support as teaching and research assistants, especially in the sciences. They also contribute significant economic benefits to the U.S.-- more than 70% of foreign undergraduate students pay full tuition, adding to the coffers of the universities they attend. Moreover, in 2002, foreign students and their dependents spent $12 billion in the U.S. economy. Perhaps the most important benefit of foreign students and scholars, Johnson says, is the good will they generate for our country—the residual affection and respect for the American people that foreign students develop after living among our citizens (Johnson, 2003).

Increased Concern about Foreign Students
However, the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the U.S. underscored the fact that not all aliens who come to study in the United States have benevolent intentions. A transcript of the April 2, 2003 Hearing before the Congressional Subcommittee on Immigration, Border Security, and Claims records our government's heightened concern about foreign students in the U.S.:

> "In June 2000, the National Commission on Terrorism found that, 'a small minority of foreign students may exploit their student status to support terrorist activity. The United States lacks the nationwide ability to monitor the immigration status of these students.'
>
> The student visa conveys a particularly valuable status to an alien terrorist because in the absence of an effective tracking system, an alien student can remain in the United States almost indefinitely.... Of the 19 identified hijackers (in the September 11 attacks), three were present in the United States on student visas. At least two of those terrorists gained skills to carry out those attacks at an American flight school.
>
> Those attacks demonstrate how easily alien students who may pose a terrorist threat can enter the country. The September 11 attacks also demonstrate how critical it is to our national security for the Government to implement an effective system for tracking and monitoring foreign students in the United States (U.S., 2003, p. 1)."

The Student and Exchange Visitors System (SEVIS)
The U.S. began establishing a student tracking system in the mid-1990s. In 1996, Congress directed the Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) to set up an automated system to track foreign students enrolled in U.S. institutions of higher education. Following the September 11, 2001 attacks, Congress authorized more than $36 million to implement and expand the tracking system by January 1, 2003 and the INS completed its development of the Student and Exchange Visitors System (U.S., 2003, p. 2).

Officials collect information about foreign students and exchange visitors through SEVIS, including biographical data,

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address, and area of study. Schools enrolling foreign students are required to report a student's failure to enroll, his/her presence, and any changes to a student's name, address, or field of study. This information is maintained through a Web-based application that enables schools to transmit electronic information and event notifications to the Department of Homeland Security and the Department of State (SEVIS, 2003).

SEVIS is designed to reduce the exploitation of immigration laws and to provide advance information to assist the Department of State with student and exchange visitor visa screening. It also allows the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) to gather and analyze information about all foreign students and exchange visitors and identify trends that might indicate a potential threat to the U.S. (SEVIS, 2003).

Challenges in Implementing SEVIS

In "Spending Time on SEVIS," Kendra Hamilton (p.26, 2003) summarizes some of the challenges the new tracking system has faced. Deadlines for fully implementing SEVIS were tight and deadlines had to be extended. Schools enrolling foreign students were given until Feb. 15, 2003 to become certified SEVIS users and the deadline by which students enrolled in the spring had to be entered into SEVIS was pushed to August 1, 2003. Technical glitches in SEVIS, from unsaved data to incorrect data appearing in the database, hindered its operation. A communications problem between SEVIS and the Department of State systems was partially responsible for an acute student visa backlog. By July, approximately 5,937 postsecondary schools had become SEVIS-certified, with nearly 1,200 additional schools pending certification. The Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement began staffing a command center around-the-clock to handle problems and serve as a liaison at ports of entry. The Bureau has also sent response teams to airports in Los Angeles, New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Miami, Detroit, Atlanta, and Washington, DC to ensure that students from schools pending certification could gain entry into the country.

See the following for more information about SEVIS and international students in the U.S.:

NAFSA: Association of International Educators website
http://www.nafsa.org//content/ProfessionalandEducationalResources/ImmigrationAdvisingResources/sevpindex.htm

U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security, Bureau of Immigrations and Customs Enforcement
Student and Exchange Visitor Program information
http://uscis.gov/graphics/shared/sevis/index.htm

Open Doors 2003: International Students in the U.S.
http://opendoors.iienetwork.org/?p=36523

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Hamilton, K. (Sept. 11, 2003). Spending time on SEVIS. *Black Issues in Higher Education*, pp. 24 -26.

Jacobson, J. (2003, Nov. 7). Foreign-student enrollment stagnates: New security measures lead to declines among Muslim countries. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Downloaded November 11, 2003 from http://chronicle.com

Johnson, V. (2003, April 11). The perils of homeland security: When we hinder foreign students and scholars, we endanger our national security. *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. Downloaded September 10, 2003 from http://chronicle.com

SEVIS Questions and Answers. (n.d.). Retrieved October 14, 2003 from http://uscis.gov/graphics/shared/sevis/SEVIS_Info_Packet.pdf

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